



Diversity and development

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The many countries and islands that make up Latin America and the Caribbean present a great diversity of physical, social, economic, and political characteristics. Latin America and the Caribbean, like Asia, form a subcontinent of great contrast.

Natural resources abound — oil, minerals, large waterways, rich marine life, and extensive tropical rain forests. Technical and economic constraints hinder the realization of the region's full potential, however, and the region's arable land area of some 1500 million hectares — of which almost 600 million are exploited — remains the basis of the region's economy. But the ownership of land and of capital resources, as well as of the technology for its exploitation, is very inequitably distributed and favours a small minority. The resulting very low standard of living in the rural areas has forced an exodus to the urban centres.

The most diverse origins and cultural backgrounds are represented in the Latin American and Caribbean population, from advanced pre-Colombian civilizations, to European and Asian colonizers and immigrants, to African slaves. At present, the population numbers 320 million people spread over some 21 million square kilometres.

The population tends to cluster in the main urban centres, some of them, like Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo, among the largest in the world. And while in Argentina the rural population accounts for only 17 percent of the country's total population, in some countries like Bolivia and Guatemala 70 percent of the population are rural dwellers. Rural peoples usually lack adequate health and education facilities, means of communications, and organized markets. They are virtually excluded from political life. And because of its limited development, the industrial sector cannot absorb the available manpower from these rural areas as well as from the cities. For a large part of the population, there is no alternative but to pursue activities of mere subsistence, or join the ranks of the unemployed.

There are, nevertheless, countries and regions within countries with higher relative levels of development, as reflected in their higher education levels, higher incomes per capita, and efficient infrastructures and services.

Because of the region's diversity, no one program or development formula can be uniformly applied. That is why the IDRC promotes and supports the search for solutions appropriate to each. The Centre emphasizes development research as the best catalyst for stimulating the progress of developing countries.

In its eight years of operation in the region, the Centre has supported 191 research projects, representing a contribution of some Cdn\$30 million covering almost all the countries. The main areas of research are those directed at solving the most important development problems — agricultural production and productivity, nutrition, health services, education, housing, science and technology, population and migration, as well as information management as a development tool.

It is impossible in a short dossier to fully describe the diversity of research activities supported by IDRC in Latin America and the Caribbean. The following articles present only a small sample of the work underway. Nevertheless, it is representative of the areas of research as well as of the spirit that guides the activities in the region — solving the problems and meeting the needs of the marginal rural populations.